Communication Concepts:
A Method for Developing Speaking Centered Lessons for
Foreign Language Classes

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Abstract

Many of the foreign language teachers and professors I have encountered throughout my EFL teaching career say that speaking is the most difficult skill to teach in a foreign language class.   Classes usually focus on teaching points (e.g. grammar or listening related lessons) that can satisfy larger classroom situations. Speaking requires adequate one to one time which makes it impossible for those teaching large classes to give adequate attention to each student. Furthermore, instructors must consider the overall linguistic ability of the class in order to avoid inactivity or unpleasant incidents.   The communication concept approach is a simple, modifiable method for training large classes which may contain students of varied linguistic capabilities to use English.   This method is explained in this paper as applied to EFL classes but can be applied to any language study.

<u>Introduction</u>

Curriculums for foreign language studies are a combination of exercises focused on developing learners' skills in the following four areas: listening, reading, writing and speaking.   These skills are generally referred to as the "4 skills" which foreign language teachers agree are essential to learning any foreign language.   The first three, although challenging, are, for the most part, easier to develop and improve as they require only passive participation on the part of the student.   Simply put, it is a student vs. CD track/DVD/article/paper activity, etc.   Response and feedback come directly from the instructor or answer book while success is expressed as a grade or correct answer which usually results with the student's silent "I did it!" feeling.   The speaking skill, however is both easy and difficult to develop. In the sense of easy, one can develop simple sentence patterns, answer static questions and by doing such their attempts at using foreign language can be understood in most instances regardless of correct word or grammar use. In the difficult sense, one can find heavy challenges as to using more abstract and complex language such as deciding which words

to combine to participate competently in a more advanced given situation.

Improvement of the speaking skill requires careful attention from both the student (as the learner) and the teacher (as the language coach).   But just like the coach and players of any sports team, a perfect game is rarely achieved.   It is through the cooperation of both parties and practice that speaking skill development can succeed.   The Communication Concept is a rudimentary method of language speaking development that is designed to help language teachers create classes that focus on developing speaking skills.   It is particularly aimed at the following types of language teachers:

1. Novice teachers with little or no experience teaching foreign language.
2. Non-native language teachers who may not be adept at speaking the language they teach but have competent knowledge of grammar.
3. Teachers that have little or no experience in teaching the language but must incorporate foreign language classes to meet education ministry requirements.

This paper will define the system but also includes a section concerning the issues that led to the development of the system.   It also provides examples on how to include student centered, active learning exercises for developing or improving speaking skills.

Issues with "Speaking" Classes

Over the years I have discovered that there are some major issues that impede the development of speaking skills.   The first issue involves the student as an individual.   Speaking a foreign language demands the student to be active as he or she must participate in some conversation-oriented exercise.   Personal characteristics such as outgoingness, self-expression, self-confidence as well as other traits deemed necessary for speaking to others or interacting can greatly interfere is this area.   Moreover, students typically run into one of two problems when instructed to speak in the target language: what to talk about and how to say what they want to say using the best and most natural words and phrases.

The second issue involves the reasons for which the student is learning the language.   Humans enjoy talking to each other and from my experience of teaching EFL, and from my own experience learning foreign languages, most students want to communicate in the language they are studying. For those who have a keen interest in their language studying, trying to talk and making mistakes is rarely an issue.   However, for those who are learning a language because it's a part of some graduation

requirement or corporate demand, speaking a foreign language can be a challenge that causes a significant amount of mental stress. I have found that providing these types of students with a variety of related, easy-to-use sentence/ question patterns relieves some of that learning stress while at the same time builds their language skills to a basic conversation level. These exercises focus on a specific usage of the grammar/language which I refer to as a concept. These are the main problems that the Communication Concept method is designed to address.

A third issue involves textbooks. Textbooks are a mainstay of language classes. They are useful in the sense that they provide instruction and information on many factors of language including grammar rules, usage and vocabulary. However, I have found that textbooks, no matter how useful, can limit speaking development as they provide only a minimal amount of material in which students can refer to during practice sessions.

If the teacher makes it a goal for the students to develop their speaking skills beyond the scope of the textbook then the teacher will be required to provide additional material. Developing this sort of material requires a significant amount of time and needs quite a bit of imagination,

thus why most teachers I have encountered will opt not to include a lot of, if any at all, this type of language development in their classes.   Another unfortunate point that slows speaking skill development, one that I have observed in my own classes, is the lack of time and support dedicated to such development in the classroom.

One final issue involves the foreign language class in schools.   Most language programs focus on grammar study and translating as it is probably the easiest way to test and evaluate students for a graded course.   Obviously, learning a language solely based on grammar limits the students' chances for developing real skills.   I have had the opportunity to teach classes for teachers who need to renew their teaching license. Many of these teachers tell me that as much as they would like to dedicate time to speaking activities their curriculums and test schedules do not allow for much time to include improvised speaking classes. Fortunately, the Communication Concept method can be adapted to the teacher's grammar lesson as well.

Now, a little bit of outside research for support.   A paper I read published on the Linguistic Society of America website entitled "*Grammar*" implies that all languages are similar as they all adhere to a grammatical

structure[1].   It is this structure that must be understood in order to

competently use the language.   This idea seems to form the basis of many

foreign language curriculums.   This style of learning makes to academically

evaluate students based on the "grammar rules".   However, that cannot be a

viable basis for evaluating practical skill.   Practical skill must be attained

in a free learning environment minus any kind of meticulous observation or

negative criticism.   It must be given room to be experimented with and

there must be a certain level of forgiveness or acceptance of mistakes.   In

simple terms, a teacher should not correct every mistake a student makes

especially when a statement, response or question is 100% understood by the

listener.

Most, if not all, linguistic anthropologists and language teachers are

familiar with Noam Chomsky's ideas on universal grammar (UG) and a

human being's ability to assimilate a second language.   He says that

'languages are cast to the same mold'[2].   I interpret this as people, regardless

of language, use their language in a similar manner as speakers of other

languages (speaking concepts) and can therefore learn how to communicate

[1] Chung, Grammar, Linguisticsociety.org

[2] Anderson, 108.

those concepts in a foreign language.   Another part of his UG theory claims that humans have a genetically inborn ability to learn another language.   If we accept this as true then it can be deduced that people can speak or converse in a foreign language to a given extent.   Those speaking may not be speaking correctly, i.e. using their own language's grammar structure while expressing the target language's words, but they are attempting to speak a foreign language albeit seriously or facetiously.

This idea has sparked a perplexing question which turned into the basis for this teaching method, "How can a teacher *guide* their students to speak natural language competently and confidently regardless of natural learning skill?"

Understanding the Communication Concept Idea

Languages should be seen as conceptual. As this probably seems somewhat vague I find the best way to explain "concept" is the things/topics the average person talks about on a daily basis (e.g. past and future expressions, descriptions, comparisons, etc.). Foreign language speaking skill development should be based on what average people talk about and

how they talk every day, or better yet, the underlying concepts of those topics

(e.g. above mentioned examples)?   One could further clarify this by asking,

"does an average Chinese person talk about topics similar to what the

average Japanese person or Australian person talks about"?   Around the

time I started learning foreign language I would have said "no" or better yet

"I can't say for sure".   Now that I have experience learning a number of

foreign and living in a variety of foreign cultures I can irrevocably say "yes".

When average people discuss "things" they tend to use simple words and

phrases dotted with a few "higher level" words, sentence patterns and idioms

and the overall topic is similar (again, using the afore mentioned examples).

Of course, those with higher levels of education, professions or just plain

haughty will use more words to impress their linguistic prowess on the lesser

skilled.   However, the person uses their language various studies have

shown that the average English speaker has a useful lexicon of 20,000 to

25,000 words[3] though they only use around 2000-5000 words per day[4] (this

number includes multiple word use).   As I can only speak 2 foreign

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[3] This is not the number of words in the English language rather the average personal
lexicon which can obviously increase.

[4] This number differs greatly in these studies and there are claims that women use more
words a day than men.

languages competently, I will venture an assumption that the same be said of speakers of other languages.   Through my observations of what people usually talk about on a daily basis I attempted to develop an effective teaching method based on that.

On the teaching side, EFL teachers are constantly faced with this challenge especially when trying to decide what to teach in speaking classes and how to teach it.   As mentioned before, textbooks provide sample conversations for addressing various situations but most lack a complete demonstration on how to involve the overall concept in various situations (e.g. taking a provided first-person conversation and demonstrating how it can be used in the third person, or how one might change the object of the conversation while still using the same concept.)   This problem of how to develop classes where students can both learn relative speaking patterns and produce personal and understandable language is the reason for developing this method for improving speaking skills.

At this point I wish to reemphasize the point that this paper has been written based on my experiences and the experiences or other ELT colleagues and acquaintances.   The teaching method herein is also based

upon these experiences and their successes.   I will not be quoting any

eminent research or researcher to support my claims because there are none

to do so.

Defining the Communication Concept

As mentioned before, the communication concept is the term I have

applied to any given situation or topic which people engage in conversation.

There is probably a better term that could be applied but I have found that

this term is the most easily understood when explaining the idea to students.

I have separated the concepts into two groups: *grammar based* and *situation*

based which will be explained.   The concepts are then organized to teach

basic, intermediate and, if the situation allows, advanced uses of the

particular language.   This organization includes related or necessary

vocabulary, basic sentence uses in first, second and third person, negative,

past and future tense, confirmation questions and informative questions.

Grammar based concepts take any given part of speech, in the case of

English, and focus on its particular uses as mentioned in the previous

paragraph.   Some examples of this might include the various ways to use

infinitive verbs in communication or on how native speakers arrange

adjectives when describing and object with two or more adjective.

Situational concepts are somewhat more difficult to define as it requires direct observation of the language.   Over the years I have been able to pick out a number of these situations and derive various sentence and question patterns that are more than enough to fill a few lessons.   To discover a situation, and it is possible to do so, one must think about what do humans talk about?   Some simple examples would be: describing people, comparing related things, inviting people to do something, making requests and so on.   The instructor should then think about the related language pieces as, again, mentioned in the previous paragraph.   I realize that the plethora of colorful textbooks for sale do the exact same thing but if due to lack of page space and the desire to earn more revenue with subsequent textbooks the concepts in question are a bit lacking.

The following lists introduce some examples of each concept.

Grammar concepts
1. Basic verb use
2. Verb tenses
3. Adjective use
4. Pronoun use
5. Preposition use
6. Informative questions
7. Confirmation questions
8. Auxiliary verb use
9. Infinitives and gerunds

Situation concepts
1. Meeting people for the first time
2. Describing people
3. Describing places, events, etc.
4. Making comparisons
5. Daily or repetitive activities
6. Shopping and bargaining
7. Ordering
8. Invitations
9. Experiences
10. Giving directions
11. Giving instructions

The overall aim of concept learning is not to learn a part, which is evident in many, if not all EFL textbooks, but to introduce the student to all aspects of using the given concept.   Moreover, it is to provide the teacher with a framework from where to build a lesson that provides students with the aforementioned aspects.   So, to restate, a concept includes the following aspects: statements for use in 1st person (2nd person if applicable), the various uses of the 3rd person, confirmation interrogatives, information interrogatives in all aspects, use of the concept through the various verb tenses, etc.

Implementing Communication Concepts in the Classroom

In this part of the paper I would like to narrate through the eyes of the novice foreign language teacher.   English will serve as the second language in my example but please remember that this method can be applied to other language classes.

The day finally comes when you, the teacher, get to teach your first

class of 20-25 English students.   Your goal is to get them to talk.   You have

heard all the rumors surrounding your chosen field about how students in

the given culture are apprehensive to participate.   You have the school

appointed textbook and have prepared the class accordingly.   You enter the

class with the excited, heart-filled enthusiasm and introduce yourself with

such only to be met with stares of disinterest, fear and possibly whispers of

"look it's a foreigner" or "I don't understand English".   Keeping in a positive

state of mind you continue with your prepared lesson. You want the students

to do a lengthy practice but it seems that they are satisfied with doing only

what's in the text and soon discover that even though the students have had

an immense amount of study they just can't get past what's written down on

the paper or in the book.   The time you set aside to use as practice time is

actually non-productive.   What can you do?   With a little bit of thinking

you can turn a non-productive class into a productive class, even for the ones

who have no interest whatsoever.   This is where the communication concept

idea comes into play.   It is simple to develop and easy for the students to

comprehend, use and step away from the textbook.   It also retains that

student centered approach which you were constantly reminded of when

studying for your TESOL or TEFL teaching certificate.

<u>Examples of concept lesson plans</u>

Lesson focus: Simple verb usage (grammar concept)

Lesson target group(s): beginners, elementary (5th-6th)[5], Jr. high (1st year)

Related vocabulary: common verbs

Specific concept: using "like" (or any other common verb)

Simple sentences:

1st person: I like _____. (2nd person: You like _____)

3rd person*: He/ she/ it likes _____.[6]

1st person negative: I don't like _____.

3rd person negative: He/ she/ it doesn't like _____.

Simple questions[7]:

Confirmation: Do you like _____?

                 Does he like _____?

                 Did you like/ Did you ever like _____?

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[5] Level target based on average Japanese English language education curriculums

[6] It should be noted here that 3rd person can also include using the name of the object.

[7] I always teach questions as 2 types: confirmation and information.   Some might know these as "Yes/ No" and "Wh-" questions.

When you were[8]_____ did you like _____?

Information: What _____ do you like?

What kind of _____ do you like?

What kind of _____ did you like when you were _____?

Past tense: I liked _____.

When I was _____ I liked _____.

I never liked _____.

Lesson focus: simple descriptive comparisons (situation concept)

Lesson target group(s): upper beginner, Jr. high (2nd year)

Related vocabulary: adjectives & changing to comparison form (-er, more)

Specific focus: A/B comparison

Simple sentence pattern: "A" is <u>adjective</u> than "B".

Negative: "A" is *not* <u>adjective</u> than "B".[9]

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[8] Using a clause like this the speaker can indicate a time period in the listeners life (e.g. when you were a child, in Jr. high school, 18 years old, etc).

[9] Sentence patterns that may not necessarily be common to native speakers should be allowed as students rely on the way their mother language is spoken to relate their thoughts in the second language.   Furthermore, the idea is, in most cases, understood by the native speaker.   Allowing such language helps the student strengthen their speaking confidence, though if it is the teacher's intention to advise against such usage then all efforts should be

Confirmative question: Is "A" <u>adjective</u> than "B"?

Confirm w/ description: Can you compare "A" and "B"?

Informative questions: Which is <u>adjective</u> "A" or "B"?

What do you think about "A" and "B"?

You are probably thinking of things to add just now as you are reading these examples.   That's the entire point of this program.   Be aware that you are still following the overall concept.   Sometimes the concept can overlap into a different concept.   For example, "like" vs. "like to do".   Mixing these concepts might cause confusion.   It is probably a better idea to save the "like to do" concept for a new lesson.

<u>Procedure and Advice</u>

I think I need to reemphasize the point that this simple method of lesson development can be employed in any class size or situation but would probably be best suited for large classes.   There are two other points that I feel should be addressed when including this method of speaking development: textbooks and pronunciation.

Many conversation textbooks provide a minimal amount of speaking

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made to do so gently without embarrassment.

ideas.   Combining this system with the textbook creates a highly usable supplement.   Your students will be able to use the concept in a variety of related situations.

Using the system is undeniably simple and once discovered the teacher will probably agree.   Teach the lesson in simple portions.   Related vocabulary is a good place to start.   This gets the students into a "language learning" state of mind.   It can also be enjoyable for students to work in groups making vocabulary lists.   Next comes introducing basic sentences and related questions both confirmation and information in that order and confirmation questions are easier to practice.   Language exchange should be the next activity either in pairs or small groups.   2 person pairs should talk for 5 minutes and then change their partners.   In larger groups I use the round robin approach in which one student acts as the questioner and the other group members state their answers.   The role of questioner changes after each round and continues until the teacher ends the activity.[10]   Break up the lesson into portions for time management and comprehension.

Proper pronunciation of the foreign language has long been an issue

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[10] It is necessary for the teacher to make sure that students are speaking English (or the target language) during the activity.

for teachers.   Of course, we as native speakers think that pronunciation is a given and since all humans are capable of speech then it is assumed that they can mimic the sounds of any language.   But, as you may have just realized, that is not necessarily the case.   Pronunciation, including intonation and tone, can prove as one of the more challenging obstacles for students no matter how enthusiastic they are to communicate in their chosen language.   Pronunciation expertise requires training, practice and even with their most exhaustive efforts there will always be a hint of accent. In my opinion, the teacher should focus on this the least.   Why?   Because this is what most teachers can be critical of and when doing so tends to destroy any bit of linguistic confidence the student may have built.   My advice is to either leave it to classmates to help correct the mispronunciations or repeat what you think might have been said using slow, enunciated speech and hope that the student catches on to what you are trying to do.   Personally, I think accents give more color to language and require the listener to pay closer attention to what is being said. Furthermore, it challenges the speaker to try to speak more clearly.

An English Education System in Peril

In order to keep the technical "stuff" separate from the personal I

have opted to save my personal thoughts until last.   I could have better

labeled as this part as "personal experience and reflections" but as I am also

including thoughts and opinions of colleagues and wish convey to prospective

teachers to this country the things they most likely will face I have given it

the subtitle.   After 23 (actually 24 if I include my time as an English tutor

while participating as an exchange student in China during the 1994-95

academic year) years of helping students to develop their English speaking

skills it has always perplexed me about "WHY" so many cannot use the

language in even the simplest sense, even after six to eight or more years of

learning the language. Until recently, I have only been able to make

conclusions based on cultural characteristics inherent to the natives but

these conclusions have been difficult to accept upon observing my students in

relaxed environments.   The excuses given for the lack of participation and

willingness to talk have been 'Japanese are quiet', 'Japanese are shy' and 'We

will be ashamed if we make a mistake'.   However, when I see them in a

natural, non-classroom environment they are loud, assertive and don't seem

to care if they screw up or not and even if they do "screw up" their peers

laugh a little, encourage them and forget anything ever happened. Now that

my two of my children are in secondary education I have been able to figure

out some of the reasons for the lack of skill. English education is Japan is

very mechanical, not practical. Teachers concern their curriculums and

lessons with grammar and vocabulary instruction. Something they can do

without fail and, of course, something the students can do with few

obstructions. This also lessens the chances of teachers receiving questions

they might not be able to answer to because of the obvious lack of

communication skill. In fact, teachers devote very little time to developing

speaking skills. Although many have expressed desire to include such

classes many feel their skills are not acceptable enough to instruct such a

class. To remedy this many public Jr. High schools, high schools and even

elementary schools have oral communication classes in which a "native"

English speaker conducts a speaking class with the students. The word

"native" originally meant an English speaking person who hails from a

country where English is spoken as the first language (e.g. the U.S., U.K.

Canada, etc.) but this has managed to be reinterpreted as someone who has

enough skill speaking English that they can conduct an oral communication class.   Logic would dictate that these teachers have passed some sort of internationally recognized test such as TOEIC, TOEFL or IELTS but it is unlikely that they would rank up as a native speaker.   For example, I speak Japanese and could probably teach a very basic course in Japanese but no Japanese native speaker would ever consider me a "native Japanese speaker".

Most education ministries seem to rather not hire foreign language teachers directly due to the cumbersomeness of finding and interviewing new people, securing legal documentation and, most of all, keeping those teachers.   Therefore, these ministries have opted to outsource this task to private companies which are little more that private English schools looking to get rich off the government.   Some even go as far as to change the format of their organization from for profit to NPO.   These companies (labeled dispatch companies) are now hiring the afore mentioned "non-native English speakers" as regular teachers as they can pay a lower salary than those of "native" origin.   Before I go on it must be made known that this part of this manuscript is by no means critical of the teachers placed into schools by

these organization.   They should be applauded for their efforts of trying to

get students to use their skills.

Now I will turn to some of the most prevalent problems teachers face

from students in their classes. These are silence, disinterest and an overall

lack of drive to do anything in class. First, a note to all aspiring ELT's

(English Language Teacher) and ALT's (Assistant Language Teacher)

wishing to come to Japan: this is just how it is, and it's not your fault

however it may be blamed on you because it's the easiest way to find a reason

for the problem.   Although the government purports the idea that

communication classes are an important addition to English education, most

local education boards as well as schools still consider the ALT/ NLT (Native

Language Teacher) communication class as a world studies course, and even

possibly edutainment (which the private English school industry is

constantly being viewed as), rather than an officially evaluated course of

study and a chance for students to experience a "native English speaking

person".   This is why there are no tests included in the class (i.e. mid-term

or final exams) that evaluate speaking skills[11].   Classes entitled

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[11] This is slated to change in the next few years according to the ministry of education

"communication English", from my observations, are merely reading classes which include articles about current world issues or notable individuals peppered with a few questions from the teacher.   This has very little to do with language use training but it is quite common for a class to carry one title yet contain an entirely different curriculum.

Another problem that emerges is the lack of English communication skills demonstrated by the teacher.   It is granted that teachers who live and teach in large cities have comparatively good speaking skills, however teachers' communication skills diminish the further out one goes into the countryside.   Furthermore, many of the education committees clearly know that many of their English teachers, although highly knowledgeable of English language grammar, mechanics and simple translation, cannot participate in discussions or even minute conversations.   I have tried to have lengthy discussions with some of my own children's English teachers only to have them try to escape the situation as soon as possible or avoid me altogether.   I have even heard incidents from colleagues and acquaintances

though it is difficult for me to envision how they will consolidate a teachable curriculum. Until that time that a true and solid curriculum is developed here it will be an "everyone for themselves" lesson plan.

who said that their Japanese counterpart could not speak at all and seem fine with their short coming.   Ironically, most schools ignore the opportunity of having native speaker operated English classes or ALT supported training classes for Japanese English teachers in order to provide an economical way to maintain their skills.   I would have to assume that this due to budget constraints or, worse, the convoluted work schedules of most public school teachers.

On the other hand, it seems to be the case that the teachers who work at private cram schools, private schools and universities that have the best speaking skills.   I can, again, attest to these facts through my own experiences.   A number of the teachers I have met at private institutions can carry on lengthy, comprehensible conversations without a problem. Many of these teachers are using speaking development lessons, but sadly, this has yet to be an included method of teaching in Japanese public schools even for oral communication classes.

Conclusion

The communication concept is a method of teaching language

learners how to use the language as native speakers might. The general thought on speaking a foreign language is that it is profoundly difficult; a skill that is possible only to a few talented individuals. Most believe that native speakers of any language only discuss topics using complex language. On the contrary, most people talk about the same, simple everyday topics you do. If one can realize those topics as concepts, then learning the foreign language becomes easier.   The methods mentioned here are but a small portion of what exists or that could be developed. The overall point is that the teacher should consider all aspects in which a concept can be used and then do their best to introduce them and, above all, have the students practice them as much as they can.

On a final note, this method can be applied to any foreign language study. Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, etc. all languages have patterns and nuances that are easy for learners to understand and use to develop a simple, basic skill. Skills that can be built upon and grown thus close the gap between cultures to promote global understanding.

For sample communication concepts please feel free to contact me by email

at gtjoe.japan@gmail.com please include *your name and communication*

concept request in the subject line.

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